

A STRATEGIC BULWARK: ON THIRD INDIA-CENTRAL ASIA DIALOGUE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Central Asia

The third [India-Central Asia Dialogue](#) convened by [External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar](#) on Sunday is one in a series of timely connections to the region by New Delhi this year, spurred in some measure by events in Afghanistan. The dialogue has been held a month before leaders of all five Central Asian Republics (CARs) come to New Delhi as chief guests for the Republic Day celebrations, and a month after National Security Adviser Ajit Doval's "Regional Security Dialogue" with his CAR counterparts to discuss Afghanistan. Among the issues discussed on Sunday were extending "immediate" humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, increasing trade, and improving connectivity. It is significant that the CAR Foreign Ministers chose to come to New Delhi, an indicator that India's outreach to Central Asia, a region neglected by South Block for several decades, is being reciprocated. The joint statement, that they share a "broad regional consensus" on Afghanistan, is apt, given that, like India, all the Central Asian neighbours of Afghanistan worry about the threat of terrorism, radicalisation, narcotics, and refugees. However, unlike India, most of the CARs maintain bilateral talks with the Taliban regime; Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have reopened missions there. Trade between India and Central Asia has long languished below \$2 billion, with all sides keen to grow this. In addition, India's \$1 billion Line of Credit for projects in Central Asia, and connectivity initiatives such as Chabahar port, the International North-South Transport Corridor and the [Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India](#) gas pipeline were all part of the dialogue.

While the strengthening of India-Central Asia ties and a revival of their traditional, historical and cultural links are much needed, it is also important to recognise the geopolitical cross-currents that complicate such efforts. While Russia continues to wield influence in the CAR governments, China's Belt and Road Initiative and \$100 billion trade (by some estimates) have made it a central figure in the region. The U.S. has also been seeking a foothold in the region, especially after Afghanistan. Meanwhile, India's land connectivity to Central Asia is hampered by Pakistan which is building strong links and transit trade agreements with each of the CARs. The alternative route, via Iran's Chabahar, has received a setback after the Taliban takeover of Kabul, and the development of the Indian-managed Shahid Beheshti terminal there continues to suffer due to the threat of American sanctions. While India has strengthened ties with other parts of Asia, it must now redouble its efforts towards Central Asia if it is to counter the 'Great Game' rivalries playing out in the region, and reclaim its shared history with countries that are an important market, a source for energy, and also a bulwark against the threats of extremism and radicalisation.

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